



# THE IMMORALIST

We lived life, as long as we read of his work will be able to bring it again. Gide is irreplaceable example, because he chose to become his own truth...

—Jean - Paul Sartre

André Gide

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# THE IMMORALIST

André Gide



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I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made

Psalm 139:121

To Henri Ghéon  
his frank comrade  
A. G.

## Preface

I present this book for what it is worth. It is a fruit filled with bitter ash, like those colocynths which sprout in the most arid deserts: rather than quench your thirst, they scorch your mouth even more, yet against their backdrop of golden sand they are not without a certain beauty.

If I had intended to set my hero up as an exemplary figure, I admit that I would have failed. Those few people who bothered to take an interest in Michel's story did so only to revile him with the full force of their rectitude. Giving Marceline so many virtues was not a waste of time: Michel was not forgiven for putting himself before her.

If I had intended this book to stand as an indictment of Michel, however, I would not have had much more success, for no one was grateful for having been made to feel so indignant towards my hero. Apparently, they felt this indignation in spite of me. This then spilled over from Michel on to me – in some people's minds, I was all but confused with him.

But I no more wanted this book to be an accusation than an apology. I refrained from passing judgement. These days the public demands an author's moral at the end of the story. In fact, they even want him to take sides as the drama unfolds, to declare himself explicitly for Alceste or for Philinte, for Hamlet or for Ophelia, for Faust or for Gretchen, for Adam or for Jehovah. It is not that I wish to claim that neutrality (I was going to say *indecision*) is a sure indicator of a superior intelligence, but I believe that many great minds have refused to . . . draw conclusions – and that posing a problem is not the same as presupposing its resolution.

I use the word 'problem' with some reluctance. In truth, in art there are no problems, none to which the work itself is not an adequate solution.

If by 'problem' we mean 'drama', I will say that the one recounted in this book, though it unfolds within the very soul of my hero, is no less universal for being circumscribed by the particularity of his experiences. I don't pretend to have invented this 'problem' – it existed before my book came along. Whether Michel prevails or not, the 'problem' continues to exist, and does not in the author's view terminate in triumph or defeat.

If certain distinguished persons have refused to see this drama as anything other than the unfolding of a particular, unusual case, and its hero as anything other than an individual with an illness, they have failed to see that there are important ideas of interest to many to be found in it. The fault does not lie with those ideas or this drama, but with the author, by which I mean his lack of skill, though he has invested all his passion, all his tears and all his care in this book. But the true interest of a work and that which any given readership might take in it are two separate things. I don't think it is too conceited to take the chance of not attracting immediate interest in matters which are inherently interesting rather than to enthuse a fickle and faddish public with no thought to the longer term.

After all, I am not trying to prove anything, merely to paint my picture well and set it in a good light.

*To Monsieur D. R.  
President of the Council*

*Sidi b. M., 30 July 189—*

*Yes, my dear brother, Michel has spoken to us, as you thought he would. Here is the account he gave us. You asked to hear it and I promised to tell you, but at the point of sending it to you I still hesitate; the more times I reread it, the more terrible it seems. Oh, what will you think of our friend? For that matter, what do I think of him myself? . . . Shall we simply reprove his actions without admitting that such manifestly cruel faculties could be turned to good purpose? But I suspect that a fair few others would be bold enough to recognize themselves in this tale. Can we find some way of utilizing such intelligence and strength, or must we banish it from our midst?*

*In what way might Michel be useful to the state? I confess I don't know . . . He needs a job. Could you use the high office your talents have so richly deserved, and the influence you exert, to find him something? Please hurry. Michel is a devoted person — he still is; but soon that devotion will have no other object than himself.*

*I write to you beneath a sky of perfect blue. In the twelve days that Denis, Daniel and I have been here, we have not seen a single cloud, nor any break in the intensity of the sun. Michel says that the sky has been crystal-clear for two months.*

*I am neither sad nor joyous. The air here fills you with an indefinable feeling of excitement, something which is as far from joy as it is from pain. Perhaps it is happiness.*

*We stay close to Michel, we don't want to leave him — you will understand why when you read these pages. It is therefore here, in his home, that we await your response. Do not delay.*

*You know how close Michel, Denis, Daniel and I have been since school, and how those close ties have grown even stronger over the years. The four of us have formed a sort of pact: if one of us is in need, the other three must respond*

to his call. So when I received Michel's mysterious cry for help, I immediately alerted the others, and we dropped everything and set off together.

We hadn't seen Michel for three years. He had got married and had gone travelling with his new wife. When he last passed through Paris, Denis was in Greece, Daniel in Russia and I, as you know, was tending our sick father. We weren't without news of him; but the reports brought by Silas and Will, who had seen him more recently, were somewhat surprising. He had changed, in ways that we were unable to explain at the time. He was no longer the bookish puritan of old, whose convictions rendered his behaviour so awkward, who could arrest our loose talk with his piercing gaze. He was . . . but I won't reveal what his own story will tell you.

Here is his story, then, just as Denis, Daniel and I heard it. Michel told it to us as we lounged on his terrace in the starlit night. When he reached the end of his story, dawn was breaking over the plain. Michel's house looks down over it and the village which is not too far away. In the heat, with its crops all gathered in, this plain looks like a desert.

Michel's house, though poor and rather odd-looking, is charming. It must get cold in the winter, as there is no glass in the windows — they aren't really windows at all, simply large holes in the walls. It is so mild we can sleep out of doors on mats.

I should also say that we had a good journey. We arrived here in the evening, exhausted by the heat, stimulated by the novelty, having stopped only briefly in Algiers and Constantine. At Constantine we caught another train to Sidi b. M., where a small cart was waiting for us. The road peters out some way short of the village, which is perched high on a rock like certain towns in Umbria. We climbed up on foot; a pair of mules carried our luggage. By this route, Michel's is the first house one comes to in the village. It is surrounded by a walled garden, or rather a paddock, in which grow three stunted pomegranate trees and a superb oleander. A Kabyle boy ran away when he saw us coming, scaling the wall with ease.

Michel made no fuss when he received us; his greetings were bland, as if he feared any display of tenderness. When we reached the threshold, however, he kissed each of us solemnly.

We barely exchanged a word until nightfall. A very frugal supper was laid out in the drawing-room, whose sumptuous decorations astonished us at the time, though they will be explained by his story. Afterwards he served us coffee,



*which he insisted on preparing himself. Then we went up to the terrace, from where the view stretched away to infinity, and like the three friends of Job we waited, gazing in admiration at the plain alight with the embers of the fast-dying day.*

*Once night had fallen, Michel began:*

## FIRST PART



# I

My dear friends, I knew I could rely on your loyalty. You came running to my call as I would have done to yours. Yet we have not seen each other for three years. I hope that our friendship, which has survived this absence so well, will also survive the tale I am about to tell you. For if my call seemed an urgent one, if I made you travel so far to find me, it was purely so that I might see you, and that you might listen to me. That is all I require: the chance to speak to you. For I have reached a point in my life where I can't go on. It is not a question of weariness – I no longer understand anything. I need . . . I need to talk, as I say. Knowing how to free oneself is nothing; the difficult thing is knowing how to live with that freedom. Bear with me as I speak about myself; I am going to tell you the story of my life. I will talk plainly, with neither modesty nor pride, more plainly than if I were talking to myself. Listen to what I have to say.

The last time we all saw each other, as I recall, was on the day of my wedding in that little country church near Angers. We had invited only a small number, and having my closest friends around me turned this mundane little ceremony into something quite touching. I had the feeling that everyone found it moving – and that was what moved me. After the service we gathered at my bride's house for a light meal; there was no raucous celebration or laughter. Then we left in a hired carriage: that traditional wedding-day scene of being waved away on a journey.

I hardly knew my wife; I doubt she knew me any better. This caused me no distress. It was a loveless marriage, largely a sop to my dying father, who was worried about leaving me on my own. I loved my father dearly. Absorbed as I was in his suffering, my only thought at this sad time was to make his end easier. So I made a life commitment

before I had explored the possibilities of what my life could be. There was no laughter at our engagement at my father's bedside, but there was a certain grave happiness at how much peace this brought him. I may not love my fiancée, I told myself, but at least I have never loved another woman. In my view that was enough to ensure our happiness. Still knowing myself so little, I believed I was giving myself to her totally. She was also an orphan and lived with her two brothers. She was called Marceline; she was barely twenty; I was four years older than her.

I said that I didn't love her – that is, I didn't feel for her what is normally thought of as love, but I did love her in the sense that I felt a tenderness, a sort of pity, and finally a very great respect for her. She was a Catholic, and I am a Protestant . . . yet so little of one! The priest accepted me, I accepted the priest, so everything went off smoothly.

My father was what is known as an 'atheist' – at least, I suppose he was, for, out of some deep feeling of embarrassment, which I think he shared, I had never broached the subject of his beliefs with him. The stern Huguenot upbringing given to me by my mother had, along with her cherished image, gradually faded from my mind – as you know, I was quite young when she died. I had little sense then of how the early moral lessons of childhood can exert an influence, of the traces they leave in the mind. That austerity I had inherited from my mother's indoctrination I brought to bear on my studies. I was fifteen when I lost my mother. My father took care of me, and threw himself into my education. I already had a good command of Latin and Greek; with him I quickly learned Hebrew, Sanskrit and Arabic. I was so advanced at the age of twenty that he made me his academic associate. The thought that I was his equal amused him, and he wanted to prove it to me. The *Essay on Phrygian Cults*, which appeared under his name, was my work – he scarcely even revised it, and it brought him more praise than anything he had written. He was delighted. As for me, I was somewhat taken aback at the success of this deception. But that was the start of my career. The most learned scholars treated me as their colleague. It makes me smile now to think of all the honours they bestowed on me . . . Thus I reached the age of twenty-five, having thought of little else but ruins and books, and knowing nothing about

life. I poured all my energy into my work. I had a few friends (you among them), but I loved friendship more than the friends themselves – I was truly devoted to them, but out of a sense of my own nobility; I cherished all my finer feelings. After all, I knew my friends as little as I knew myself. It never occurred to me that I could lead a different life, that there was a different way to live.

My father and I had simple needs. We spent so little money that I reached the age of twenty-five not knowing that we were rich. I had always believed, not that I thought about it much, that we had just enough to live on, and I had picked up such thrifty habits from my father that I was even somewhat disturbed to find out how much we owned. I was so detached from such things at the time that even after my father's death, though I was his only heir, I was unable to form a clear idea of the scale of my fortune. This happened only when I came to be married, and realized that Marceline was bringing next to nothing to the union.

Another thing of which I was unaware, something perhaps even more important, was that my health was very fragile. How could I have known? I had never subjected it to any test. I had the occasional cold, which I ignored. The excessively quiet life I led both made me feeble and protected me from illness at the same time. Marceline, on the other hand, seemed robust – how much more so than I we were soon to discover.

On our wedding night we slept in my apartment in Paris, where two rooms had been prepared. We stayed in Paris only long enough to buy a few essential items, then travelled to Marseille, from where we embarked for Tunis.

All the things that had demanded my attention, the bewildering speed of recent events, the unavoidable emotion of the wedding following hard on the heels of the more genuine emotions of my bereavement, had all worn me out. It was only when we were on the boat that my tiredness caught up with me. Until then, all my commitments, while adding to my fatigue, had also taken my mind off it. The enforced leisure of the crossing finally gave me time to reflect. It felt to me as if it were for the very first time.

Also for the first time I had agreed to take a long break from my work. I had only ever allowed myself short holidays before then. One trip to Spain with my father, shortly after the death of my mother, had, admittedly, lasted more than a month; another, to Germany, six weeks; there had been a few others. But these were study trips; my father never allowed himself to be distracted from his painstaking research; when I wasn't accompanying him, I used to read. And yet, as soon as we left Marseille, memories of Grenada and Seville came back to me: the clearer skies, the deeper shadows, the festivals, laughter, singing. That is what we are about to experience, I thought. I went up on deck and watched Marseille recede into the distance.

Then suddenly I thought I might be neglecting Marceline.

She was sitting in the prow. I approached her and, for the first time, really looked at her.

Marceline was very pretty. You know that, you have seen her. I reproached myself for not having noticed it before. I had known her too long to see her afresh – our families had been friendly for ages, I had watched her grow up, I was used to her gracefulness . . . for the first time I was struck by how graceful she really was.

She was wearing a simple black straw hat with a large veil; she was blonde, but did not appear delicate. Her skirt and bodice were made out of the Scottish shawl we had chosen together. I didn't want her to wear the black of mourning on my account.

She sensed that I was looking at her and turned to face me . . . Until then, the attentions I had paid her had been somewhat dutiful. I had substituted for love a sort of cold gallantry, which I could see bothered her a little. Did Marceline sense at that moment that I was looking at her for the first time in a different way? She in turn looked me in the eye, then, very tenderly, she smiled at me. Without saying a word, I sat down next to her. Until now I had lived for myself, or at least according to my own devices. In getting married I hadn't thought of my wife as anything other than a companion; I hadn't thought very clearly about how my life might be changed by our union. I had only just grasped that the monologue was coming to an end.

We were alone on deck. She leaned her head in my direction, I pressed it gently to me. She raised her eyes; I kissed her on the eyelids,

and suddenly felt as I did so a new sort of pity. It overcame me so violently that I couldn't hold back the tears.

'What's the matter?' Marceline asked.

We began to talk. I was charmed by her words. I had developed certain opinions about how silly women were. That evening, sitting next to her, it was I who seemed the more awkward and stupid.

So she to whom I had attached my life had a whole real life of her own! So weighty was this thought that I awoke several times that night. Several times I sat up in my bunk and saw, lying in the other bunk below, Marceline, my wife, asleep.

The next morning, the sky was splendid, the sea more or less calm. A few leisurely conversations helped us to relax with each other still further. The marriage was really beginning. On the morning of the last day of October, we disembarked at Tunis.

I had intended to spend no more than a few days there. To show you how foolish I was, I could see no attractions in this new country other than Carthage and a handful of Roman ruins: Timgad, which Octave had told me about, the mosaics of Sousse, and particularly the amphitheatre of El Djem, where I planned to hasten without delay. First I had to go to Sousse, and from there take the mail coach. I was determined not to be distracted by anything on the way.

Nevertheless, Tunis came as a great surprise. The contact with new sensations aroused parts of me that had lain dormant and, through lack of use, had retained their mysterious youthfulness. I was more astonished and bewildered than amused, but what gave me the greatest pleasure was the delight Marceline took in everything.

However, every day I grew more and more tired, but I would have been ashamed to give in to it. I was coughing and had a strangely uncomfortable feeling in my upper chest. We are heading south, I thought, the warmth will perk me up.

The Sfax mail coach leaves Sousse at eight in the evening and gets to El Djem at one in the morning. We had reserved half-compartment seats. I had expected to find an old bone-shaker; however, the seats were quite comfortable. But the cold! . . . Such was our naïve trust in the mildness of southern climes that we were lightly dressed, with



nothing more than a shawl between us. No sooner had we left Sousse and the shelter of its hills than the wind began to blow. It bounded across the plain, howling, whistling, it got in through every little chink in the doors; there was no protection from it. We were both chilled to the bone when we arrived, and I was exhausted by the jolts of the coach and by a terrible cough which shook me even more. What a night! When we reached El Djem there was no inn, merely a dreadful little *bordj*. What were we to do? The coach set off. The village was asleep. In the dark, which seemed vast, we could just make out the lugubrious shape of the ruins. We heard dogs howling. We stayed in a grubby little room where two wretched beds had been set up. Marceline was shivering with the cold, but at least we were out of the wind.

The next day was dismal. We were surprised when we went out to find a completely overcast sky. The wind was still blowing, but less violently than the night before. The coach would not be passing through again until evening . . . As I have said, it was a bleak day. I explored the amphitheatre in a few minutes and found it a disappointment; it even seemed ugly to me, beneath that dull sky. Perhaps my fatigue heightened my boredom. Around midday, at a loose end, I revisited it, searching in vain for inscriptions in the stones. Marceline sat out of the wind, reading an English book she had fortunately brought with her. I sat down next to her.

‘What a dreary day. I hope you’re not too bored.’

‘No, as you see, I have something to read.’

‘Why on earth did we come here? I hope you aren’t feeling cold.’

‘Not too cold. What about you? You’re quite pale.’

‘No . . .’

That night, the wind picked up again. Finally the coach arrived. We set off.

The first jolts of the coach went right through me. Marceline, who was very tired, went straight to sleep on my shoulder. My coughing will wake her, I thought, and gently, very gently disengaging myself, I propped her against the side of the coach. However, I wasn’t coughing now, I was spitting. This was new. There was no strain, it came in little jerks at regular intervals. It was such a curious sensation that at first I